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THE TESTS OF TRUE CHRISTIANITY

1 John Overview

By

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1 John Lesson 1

The Tests of True Christianity 1 John Overview

Hardly a day goes by when I do not delete numerous spam emails trying to get me to purchase a fake Rolex watch or college diploma. Other emails promise that I will receive millions of dollars from a total stranger, usually in Africa. I recently read in *Reader's Digest* about a guy that was taken in by this type of scam. I was surprised that he allowed his real name and picture to appear in the magazine. I would have been too embarrassed to show my face!

Most of these phony deals are easy to spot. But far more serious than losing some money to con artists would be to lose your soul because you bought into a false religion. Satan always has made sure that numerous spiritual con artists thrive at their trade. Paul warned the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:13-15),

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds.

It's not easy to spot an angel of light or servant of righteousness *in disguise!* That's why the New Testament abounds with warnings about false teachers. It's easy to be led astray. In his final words to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:29-30), Paul predicted, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." In what are to me the most frightening words in the New Testament, Jesus warned (Matt. 7:21-23),

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

These repeated warnings mean that we must be very careful to make sure that our Christian faith is true, both objectively and personally. We need to know that Christianity is objectively true, that the testimony about Jesus Christ is genuine and not the work of spiritual con artists. And, we need to know that our personal faith in Christ is genuine faith, not the false faith that results in hearing on judgment day, "I never knew you; depart from Me...." Since our eternal destiny is at stake, we need to know that we have the real deal, not a phony substitute!

The aged apostle John wrote First John against the backdrop of influential false teachers to help his readers know that their faith was genuine and that they possessed eternal life in Jesus Christ. John Stott writes (*The Epistles of John, Tyndale Bible Commentaries* [Eerdmans], p. 42), "His great emphasis is on the differences between the genuine Christian and the spurious, and how to discern between the two." He adds (p. 50), "The predominant theme of these Epistles is Christian certainty." Stott points out that the Greek verb (*ginosko*) that means, "to know by observation and experience" occurs 15 times and the word (*oida*) meaning, "to know by reflection" is used 25 times. The verb (*phaneroo*), "to make known" is used nine times (and the noun once), and the noun (*parresia*), "confidence" is used four times. John wants us to know some things with certainty!

HISTORICAL SETTING AND BACKGROUND:

I agree with the consensus of scholars that the apostle John wrote these three epistles late in his life near the end of the first century. John had moved to Ephesus, on the west coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Perhaps Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders some thirty years before had come to pass. A number of false teachers had arisen in the churches of that area. John uses strong terms to describe these men, showing that they were not true Christians who merely had different opinions on some minor matters. He calls them "false prophets" (4:1), "antichrists" (2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7), "liars" (2:22), and "deceivers" (2 John 7; 1 John 2:26 [verb]). He repeatedly implies or states that they are not of God (4:6), but are from the devil (3:8, 10); they are from the world (4:5); and, they do not know God (3:6; 4:6).

Their purpose was to deceive the Christians on important matters of doctrine and practice. He states (2:26), "These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you" (see

also, 2 John 7). They had at one time been in the church, but they had left to form their own churches, based on their supposedly “enlightened” view of things. John writes (2:19), “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.”

Probably they had taken a number of church members with them and they were actively recruiting from those who had not left with them. They probably said, “We used to believe just as you do, but we’ve moved to something better. We have deeper knowledge than we used to have. Come and check it out!” Whenever that sort of thing happens, it creates a lot of confusion and disruption in the church. Those who remain in the church begin to wonder, “Could those people be right? Am I missing something? How can we know that we’re right?” Those who leave are critical of the church leaders and point out imperfections in the church. Those who stay behind begin to notice these flaws. Pretty soon, the entire church is engulfed in turmoil.

Although John never identifies himself by name or calls himself an apostle, he writes with strong apostolic authority. He was the “apostle of love” and he was pushing ninety, but he confronts the false teachers and their errors head on! He begins by asserting that he knows what he is talking about, because he was there with Jesus from the start. He had heard Him, seen Him, and even touched Him (1:1), and the message that he was proclaiming was none other than that which he and his fellow apostles had received directly from Jesus Christ (1:2-3, 5).

John does not paint in subtle tones, but in bold black and white. He makes many exclusive, either-or statements. Note 1:6: “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” Or (1:8), “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Or (2:4), “The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

He says that either you love the world or you love the Father, but not both (2:15). Either you have the Father and the Son or you don’t (2:22-23). Either you are born of God and do not practice sin or you are not born of God and do practice sin (3:6-9). Either you are a child of God and love your brother or you’re a child of the

devil and hate your brother (3:10-12). There are other examples, but they all add up to show that John isn't subtle. He paints the two options in bold relief so that if anyone is in the middle, he will be forced to commit himself to the truth or walk knowingly into error. He was not in favor of modifying foundational truths to fit the times (see 2:24).

Just who were these false teachers and what was the heart of their error? We cannot know for certain, but we can make some educated guesses based on John's direct references to their teaching, as well as the positive emphasis that he feels is necessary to counteract it. It's kind of like we're listening to one side of a phone conversation and trying to figure out what the other party was saying based on what we hear. Here's what we can figure out:

These false teachers were propagating a three-fold error. First, there was a *doctrinal error* regarding the person of Jesus Christ. They denied that Jesus was the Christ (2:22). This probably did not mean that they denied that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, but rather that they denied His divine Sonship (2:23; 4:15). Also, they denied that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. John warns (4:2), "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (see also, 2 John 7). In other words, they denied that Jesus was God in human flesh. These heretics also claimed to be more progressive than the apostles, and that they had the Father without the Son (2 John 9; 1 John 2:22-23). Most theological errors go astray on the person and/or work of Christ, because these subjects are essential to the Christian faith.

The second main error of these heretics was *ethical* or moral. As we saw in James 5:19-20, theological errors usually go hand in hand with moral errors. These heretics either denied that sin exists in our nature and practice or they said that sin does not matter since it does not interfere with our fellowship with God. John soundly refutes this in 1:5-10. These teachers were antinomian ("against the law"), saying, "We know Christ, but we aren't hung up with all of these commandments! We're free in Christ and don't worry about mere rules!" But, as F. F. Bruce points out (*The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 26), "Christians stand on the brink of disaster when they begin to modify the adjective 'ethical' with the adverb 'merely.'" John soundly refutes this moral error, beginning in 2:3-6.

The third error of the heretics was *relational*: while undoubtedly they claimed to be loving (who would not?), in practice they did not demonstrate genuine, biblical love for others. Probably their claim to special, deeper knowledge caused them to come across with arrogance. They were hostile and intolerant of those who didn't agree with them. Greed caused them to not care for the needy in practical ways (3:16-18).

Who were these men (historically)? While there is much debate, many scholars identify them as Cerinthian Gnostics. Gnosticism was the philosophical blend of various pagan, Jewish, and semi-Christian systems of thought. Its two main tenets were dualism and illumination. Dualism meant that all matter is evil and spirit is good. Since matter is evil, a good God could not have created the material universe. Hence the Gnostics posited a series of emanations from the Supreme Being, each a bit more removed, until one who was sufficiently remote created the world. Since matter is evil, they could not conceive of how God could take on a human body subject to pain, suffering, and death. Thus they denied the incarnation.

Cerinthus was a Gnostic living in Ephesus. The early church father, Polycarp, who knew John, told a story about the apostle going to bathe at the public bathhouse in Ephesus, when he learned that Cerinthus was inside. John rushed out without bathing, exclaiming, "Let us fly, lest even the bathhouse fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within" (in Stott, p. 46).

Cerinthus taught that Jesus was not born of a virgin, but was the natural son of Joseph and Mary. He was a very good and righteous man. At His baptism, "the Christ" descended on him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler. Jesus then proclaimed the unknown Father and performed miracles. At last, the Christ departed from Jesus and the human Jesus suffered, died, and rose again, while the Christ remained untouched, since He is a spirit being. So Cerinthus separated the man Jesus from the divine Christ.

It would seem that John wrote the doctrinal part of his letter against these pernicious errors. This is especially in focus in 5:6, "This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood." John is asserting that the Christ came not only through His baptism (water), but also through His death (blood). You cannot separate the humanity of Jesus from His deity.

The Gnostic dualism also led to some moral aberrations. On the one hand, since they thought that matter is evil, some Gnostics practiced strict asceticism, which is the attempt to be righteous by harsh treatment of the body. Others reasoned that since the enlightened spirit is separate from the evil body, morality does not matter. So they claimed to be righteous in spirit even while they indulged the flesh. John repeatedly confronts this error.

The other main feature of Gnosticism was illumination. They claimed that the way to salvation was through secret enlightenment. Only the initiated, who knew their secret theories, were in the light. This exclusive mentality led them to despise unenlightened outsiders. It produced an arrogant lack of love. John repeatedly shows that genuine love is the mark of all who believe in the Savior who gave Himself for us on the cross.

JOHN'S PURPOSE:

Thus John had a two-fold purpose in writing: First, he had a *polemical* purpose, to attack and refute the errors of Cerinthian Gnosticism. He exposes and refutes their doctrinal errors about the person of Christ. He refutes their ethical error (that obedience doesn't matter) by showing that the one who says he abides in Christ must walk as Christ walked (2:6). And, he attacks the loveless arrogance of the false teachers by showing that true believers must love one another as Christ has loved us.

John's second purpose was *pastoral*. He wanted to cultivate assurance of who Jesus Christ is, assurance of salvation and genuine fellowship with God and with one another among his "little children" (he uses this term 7 times out of 8 in the New Testament; John 13:33 is the only exception). Regarding Jesus Christ, John wants his flock to *know with assurance who Jesus Christ is and why He came*. He is the eternal Son of God, sent by the Father to be the Savior of the world (not just of the exclusive, enlightened few; 2:2; 4:14).

He assures them of this truth through three witnesses. First, *the historical events* witness to Jesus Christ. He was sent (4:9, 10, 14), He came (5:20), and He was manifested in the flesh (1:2; 3:5, 8; 4:2). Second, *the apostolic testimony* witnesses to Jesus Christ. The apostles had firsthand, eyewitness evidence of His reality (1:1-3; 4:14). Third, *the Holy Spirit* gives inner witness of the truth about Jesus Christ to every believer, corroborating the external witness (2:20, 27; 3:24;

4:13; 5:7, 8). John wants his children to be assured about the truth of Jesus Christ.

John also wants to cultivate *assurance about eternal life*. He wants his children to *know* that they have eternal life. This includes knowing that they know Jesus Christ (2:3; 5:20) and that they are in Him (2:5-6; 4:13; 5:20). They can know that they are of the truth (3:19) and are of God (5:19). They can know that they have passed out of death into life (3:14). John sums up his purpose (5:13), "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life."

John's third pastoral purpose was to cultivate *genuine fellowship with God and with other believers*. He wants to bring his readers into the circle of apostolic fellowship, which is with the Father and the Son (1:3-4, 6). And, he wants them genuinely to love one another (2:3-11).

THE STRUCTURE OF 1 JOHN:

John does not structure his letter in a logical, closely reasoned style, as Paul often does. John is more intuitive, speaking as a bold witness. Many commentators say that it is impossible adequately to outline John's argument. Others argue that it follows a spiral form, repeating themes for emphasis. I cobbled together my outline by borrowing from several others, along with my own analysis of the flow of thought. (See last two pages.) John's overall theme is:

We can be assured of the authenticity of our faith if we enjoy fellowship with God based on the truth about Jesus Christ, resulting in a lifestyle of obedience and love.

Conclusion

Have you bought into true Christianity, or could your faith be a cheap, phony substitute? John gives you three test questions:

- (1) The doctrinal test: Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, come in the flesh?
- (2) The ethical test: Does your life reflect growing obedience to Christ?
- (3) The relational test: Does your life reflect growing, practical love for others?

Is the whole process permeated with the joy of fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ? Your eternal destiny rides on passing the test! If any of these areas is lacking, our studies in 1 John should help get you ready for the big final exam.

(See outline on next two pages.)

Application Questions

1. Why are theological errors significant? How can we know which errors are serious and which are relatively minor?
2. Why is it important to be clear about the biblical truth concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ?
3. Why must the theological and the ethical always be wed? What can happen when they're separated?
4. Is assurance a once and for all thing, or something that you grow in?

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The Theme and Outline of 1 John
Pastor Steven J. Cole

Theme: We can be assured of the authenticity of our faith if we enjoy fellowship with God based on the truth about Jesus Christ, resulting in a lifestyle of obedience and love.

Outline:

1. Authentic faith enjoys fellowship with the Father and the Son (1:1-2:2).
 - A. Prologue: the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ should lead us into authentic fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1:1-4).
 - B. The practice of authentic fellowship requires walking in the light, relating to the holy God through the blood of Jesus Christ, our Advocate (1:5-2:2).
 - (1) God is absolutely holy (1:5).
 - (2) To have fellowship with the holy God, we must walk in the light, confessing all of our sins (1:6-10).
 - (3) When we do sin, Jesus Christ is our Advocate, based on His shed blood (2:1-2).
2. Authentic faith may be tested by belief in the truth about Jesus Christ, obedience to His commands, and love for His people (2:3-5:5).
 - A. The first application of the tests (2:3-27):
 - (1) Authentic faith obeys God's commandments (2:3-6).
 - (2) Authentic faith loves God's people (2:7-11).
 - (3) Assuring clarification: John's readers have authentic faith (2:12-14).
 - (4) Authentic faith is not of the world, but rather it knows and believes the truth about Jesus Christ (2:15-27).
 - (a) Authentic faith is not of the world (2:15-17).
 - (b) Authentic faith, in contrast with the false teachers, knows and believes the truth about Jesus Christ (2:18-27).
 - B. The second application of the tests (2:28-4:6):
 - (1) Authentic faith practices a lifestyle of obedience to God (2:28-3:10).
 - (2) Authentic faith practices a lifestyle of practical love for God's people (3:11-18).
 - (3) Assuring clarification: a lifestyle of obedience and love will assure our hearts before God (3:19-22).

- (4) Authentic faith believes in Jesus Christ in accord with the apostolic witness (3:23-4:6).
 - (a) Authentic faith believes in Jesus Christ and practices love and obedience (3:23-24).
 - (b) Authentic faith, in contrast with the false teachers, believes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh in accord with the apostolic witness (4:1-6).
- C. The third application of the tests (4:7-5:5):
 - (1) Authentic faith practices a lifestyle of love for God's people, based on God's great love for us (4:7-12).
 - (2) Authentic faith believes the apostolic witness about Jesus Christ, experiences the love of God, is assured before God, and practices love for God's people (4:13-21).
 - (a) Authentic faith believes the apostolic witness about Jesus Christ (4:13-15).
 - (b) Authentic faith experiences the love of God (4:16).
 - (c) Assuring clarification: authentic faith has confidence in the day of judgment because of God's love (4:17-18).
 - (d) Authentic faith practices love for God's people, based on His love (4:19-21).
 - (3) Authentic faith believes that Jesus is the Christ, loves those born of God, and obeys God's commandments (5:1-5).
 - (a) Authentic faith believes that Jesus is the Christ (5:1).
 - (b) Authentic faith loves those born of God (5:2).
 - (c) Authentic faith obeys God's commandments, stemming from faith in Jesus Christ (5:3-5).
- 3. Authentic faith is assured of eternal life (5:6-21).
 - A. Authentic faith is assured of eternal life because we believe in God's testimony concerning His Son (5:6-12).
 - B. Authentic faith is assured of eternal life because we believe all that John has written in this letter (5:13).
 - C. Authentic faith is assured of eternal life because we experience answers to our prayers (5:14-17).
 - D. Authentic faith is assured of eternal life because we know God and are separate from the world and its idols (5:18-21).